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ABSTRACT

To insure that each child has a safe and positive environment at school, teachers should earn their pupils' respect and classroom activities should be oriented to helping each child succeed. Three key phrases reinforce the expectation of success. These phrases, which teacher and pupils should understand and remember, are: (1) It is O.K. to make a mistake; (2) You don't have to know everything today; and (3) It is intelligent to ask for help. Teachers should regard discipline as a means of teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors. Introduction of a "power chair" in which children can seat themselves when they feel they are losing control is one technique teachers can use that does not embarrass or humiliate students. Teachers spend a great deal of time trying to solve disputes between children or figure out what really happened in an altercation. Instead of doing these things, teachers can wait until the children are calm and then ask them to talk with each other privately about the problem with a view toward obtaining one story that is agreed upon by both children. As a result of such collaboration, the children may fight again, work the problem out, or realize how silly their argument or problem was. (RH)

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Creating a Safe and Positive
Classroom Environment

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Georgia Association for Childhood Education International
(Macon, Georgia, October 1990)

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Creating a Safe and Positive Classroom Environment

So many of our nation's young children come from homes that are not safe places, physically and emotionally. Parents who have little understanding of child growth and development may not realize the implications of raising children in an environment where they are not treated in a positive, nurturing manner. Preschool and elementary teachers are very important and influential people in their student's lives, and it is up to them to insure each child a safe and positive environment at school in which to learn and grow.

The first step in creating this atmosphere is earning the children's trust. Teachers should talk with children in a pleasant tone of voice, meeting them at their eye level and touching them gently. If teachers give the children with whom they are speaking their full, undivided attention, the children will believe that the teacher respects them, therefore strengthening their self-esteem. Along with teacher behaviors that relay positive feelings, the physical setting of the school and classroom need also project a warm feeling. The children should feel like their classroom belongs to them.

Young children should feel that they are worthy,

intelligent individuals. Classroom activities should be oriented to helping each child succeed. To reinforce the expectation of success, there are three key phrases that teachers and children, even preschool children, should understand and remember:

1. It is O.K. to make a mistake, we are just learning.
2. You don't have to know everything today.
3. It is intelligent to ask for help.

These phrases could be placed on poster board along with an eye-catching, expressive picture that may help the child remember what the phrase says. When explaining the phrases, the teacher should model situations and discuss feelings children may have when it would be appropriate to remember the phrases. To reinforce, the teacher could think aloud when she does not know the answer to a question or makes a mistake. For example, the teacher may not know the correct answer to a question about spiders so she could say "I don't know the answer to that question, but that's O.K., I'll just look in this book to see if I can find the answer". Many situations occur when teachers need to ask other teachers, the principal or even a parent for help. Talking aloud and saying the applicable phrase provides a wonderful model for the children.

Discipline or behavior management, is an area that teachers need to be especially careful in order to

maintain a safe, positive environment. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher and children should discuss what types of behavior are inappropriate. A list could be generated that would serve as a springboard for creating positively stated classroom rules. For example, if an inappropriate behavior is loud talking while others are working, then a positively stated rule could read "use your whisper voice while working". If the children suggest that making fun of others or not sharing are inappropriate behaviors, the rule could read "be a friend", discussing what it means to be a friend. As rules are made, teachers should discuss and role play inappropriate and appropriate behaviors. Rule making should be approached as a joint effort yet the children will take ownership of the rules. When inappropriate behaviors do occur, discuss with the children the positively stated rules.

Teachers should regard discipline as teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors. When it is necessary to discipline children, refrain from embarrassing or humiliating them because this will only reinforce their feelings of worthlessness and incompetence. The more sensitive a teacher is to children's feelings, the safer they will feel.

Time-out or isolating children because of

misbehavior has become very popular in preschools and elementary schools. Teachers send children to this area of isolation for displaying inappropriate behaviors. Children might be sent to the time-out area for disrupting the class during story time. In this case, the story would be interrupted, the child singled out in front of the class, ordered to time-out and will probably be asked to rejoin to group later. Most of the time, this occurs without any discussion with the child about the inappropriate behaviors that were displayed. Time-out can be a beneficial alternative if used carefully, but is very often the children somehow blame the teacher for their misbehavior and fail to assume responsibility for their own actions.

In order for the children to feel like they have control over their behavior and therefore assume responsibility for their own actions, the teacher can introduce a "power chair" which serves the same isolation purpose of time-out yet the children place themselves in the chair when they feel like they are losing control. To insure the success of the power chair, the teacher should introduce and model situations in which a child would use it. For example, the teacher might say (pretending to be a student) "I am trying very hard to do my work and Sally keeps talking to me. I asked her to leave me alone, but then

she started drawing on my paper and trying to take my crayons. I really want to hit her and yell at her to go away. I am losing control over myself and I need to get away from her before I end up breaking some rules. I will sit in the power chair while I calm down. Because I left, Sally went away. She was not having fun anymore". By moving to the power chair, the children are not humiliated or embarrassed by being reprimanded by the teacher in front of the other students. By incorporating the power chair into the classroom, the children not only learn to be aware of their own behavior but they also realize they can control their behavior and are responsible for their own actions.

Teaching the children the kinds of behaviors that other children may exhibit could prove to be beneficial for the children and teacher. Through teacher modeling and discussion about ignoring, situations can be identified in which children could ignore the behavior of others. Support can be given to children by other children and the teacher if a child is annoying them. For example, Ben is sitting beside Angie and making strange noises. He knows that Angie will eventually hit him or yell at him to stop. Because Angie will ignore Ben's behavior, he will probably stop. When introducing the concept of ignoring behavior, the

teacher could call ignoring "the I word" and cue children by pointing to her own eye. Whenever a situation arises when a child should ignore the behavior of another, the teacher and students can cue the bothered student by pointing to their eye.

Tattling is a problem that consumes a great deal of teacher's time, yet many teachers do not know how to handle tattling in a positive manner. A commercially purchased or teacher made poster of a large animal can be added to the classroom and given a name like "Tony the Tattling Tiger". The teacher can discuss examples of tattles (i.e., "He made a face at me"). The teacher should be notified if someone is stealing, cheating or hurting another child. The distinction needs to be made between what things the teacher really needs to know about and what things the children can handle on their own. If a child has a strong urge to tatttle about something that is not important, the teacher should direct the child to the tatttle animal. Children will tatttle to this figure and seemingly feel much better. This system has been very successful with young children in preschool, kindergarten and grade one, and it also helps to maintain the positive tone of the classroom.

Teachers spend a great deal of time attempting to solve disputes between children, or to "figure out what

really happened". For example, while playing outside, Ben and Angie run to the teacher, both crying. The teacher asks about the problem and both children begin talking at once, pointing to the other and trying to speak through the sobs. The teacher tries to mediate as Ben says "Angie threw dirt in my face" and Angie replies, "you threw it in my face first". A series of "No, I didn't; Yes you did" follows.

The teacher could handle this in one of two ways. She could continue to mediate, trying to get at the real truth. She will probably end up feeling very frustrated when no solution is reached. Her other alternative is to wait until both children are calm and then ask them to talk with each other, privately about the problem. The teacher then tells them that she wants them to talk about what happened and come up with one story that they both must agree upon. The children will then go off by themselves to discuss the problem.

Three things can follow:

1. The children begin fighting again, in which case the teacher will need to separate them and decide on an alternate plan of action,
2. the children could work the problem out. This usually ends with a misunderstanding as the culprit of the argument (Angie was playing with some dirt and without realizing Ben was near, threw the dirt into the

air. He thought she purposely threw it at him and retaliated). All is then forgotten and they continue to play, or

3. while talking, they both realize how silly their argument or problem really was, and they begin to play. Handling disputes in this manner provides the children with the structure they need to assume responsibility for their actions. The teacher does not get involved and the children learn a little more about relationships.

This article is intended to offer a different perspective on philosophy and discipline for preschool and elementary teachers. In order to create a truly safe and positive environment, the teacher must see the benefit for herself and the children. Commitment to providing positive experiences throughout the school year will follow. Once the children are comfortable with their teacher, her classroom organization and expectations, they can begin to take responsibility for their own behavior; a main goal of education.